

VZCZCXYZ0010
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTA #1007/01 1501218
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 291218Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2497
INFO RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1910
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 8278
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 8159
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 7323
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 2357
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1531

UNCLAS ASTANA 001007

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN - ALMATY NOTES, MAY 12 - MAY 23, 2008

¶1. The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital," following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

National Social Democratic Party Initiates Coalition

¶2. The National Social Democratic Party (OSDP) has initiated a new political coalition called "Khalyk Kenes" (People's Discussion), party leader Zharmakhan Tuyakbay told Inkar internet radio in a May 15 interview. According to Tuyakbay, the coalition is an alternative to parliament and a place for dialogue among various political forces. About 30 political leaders, including leaders of small pro-government political parties, have signed on to the project. However, two key opposition parties -- Bulat Abilov's Azat (formerly True Ak Zhol) Party and Serikbolsyn Abdildin's Community Party refused to join. Tuyakbay attributed this to the fact that Azat and the Communists are at odds with two parties that did join the coalition: Alikhan Baimenov's Ak Zhol Party and Vladislav Kosaryev's People's Communist Party.

Media Watchdog NGO Facing Financial Problems

¶3. The AdilSoz media watchdog NGO is on the verge of ceasing its activities, its head, Tamara Kaleyeva, announced at a press conference in Almaty on May 13. Beginning June 1, AdilSoz's principal source of funding, the Open Society Institute, which has paid its office rent, staff wages, and communication expenses, will terminate AdilSoz's financing. According to Kaleyeva, AdilSoz will try to survive on small grants and by cutting its expenses.

Newspaper Publisher Accused on Bribery

¶4. The publisher of the newspaper Anti-Corruption Bulletin, Tokbergen Abiyev, was detained while passing a bribe to an officer of the Financial Police, law enforcement authorities reported on May 12. Abiyev was reportedly offering \$1,600 plus 50,000 tenge (\$417) to the officer in exchange for comprising information about judges. A criminal case has been filed against Abiyev.

¶5. Tokbergen Abiyev was previously the publisher of Zakon i Pravosudiye ("Law and Justice"), a newspaper which was closed several months ago by a court ruling. He subsequently launched Anti-Corruption Bulletin. Abiyev published a number of articles criticizing corruption in the judicial system.

Bomb Goes Off Under Journalist's Car

¶6. A bomb was apparently placed under the car of journalist Yermurat Bapi of the Taszhargan opposition newspaper on May 8. Though it went off, the detonation was not powerful enough to damage

the gas tank and cause it to explode. "Mostly likely, it was purely an act of intimidation. If somebody wanted truly to make an attempt on my life, there are many opportunities," Bapi commented at a May 13 press conference in Almaty. Bapi suggested that the incident was the latest "warning" for his critical reporting about high ranking officials and businessmen. In March, Bapi claimed that unidentified individuals shot two bullets through his office window. The police launched a criminal investigation into that case, but Bapi has received no word about the status of the investigation. Bapi has filed a report on the bombing incident with the Almaty branch of the National Security Committee (KNB).

Call for Granting Amnesty to Squatters

17. "We consider it necessary to pass a law legalizing ownership of land plots that have been illegally occupied by squatters. They have been living there for three to five years. There are only two ways to solve the problem: either to drive out these people by force or to legalize their status," the leader of the Shanyrak movement, Asylbek Khozhakhmetov, remarked at conference on internal migration issues held at parliament on May 15. Kozhakhmetov also proposed setting up public commissions on land plot and demolition issues in every major city in Kazakhstan. According to Kozhakhmetov, in 2007, 24 protest actions against confiscation and demolition of residences were held in Almaty. As a result, 144 people were detained and 28 brought to administrative account.

18. Almaty's new mayor, Akhmetzhan Yesimov, has set up a special commission on the problems of illegal settlements in Almaty's outskirts, Megapolis weekly reported on May 12. The commission is supposed to propose recommendations within several weeks. Heads of Almaty district administrations have been instructed to help the residents of these settlements with registration and obtaining social benefits.

Hunger Strike Against Confiscation of Houses

19. A group of Almaty residents intends to start a hunger strike in protest against a city government ruling on seizing their residences for "state needs," www.kub.info reported on May 16. Their request to set up a protest tent behind Almaty's Saryarka Cinema was denied by the authorities. The residents instead plan to hold a protest action in the courtyard of the residential building where they live.

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